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ABSTRACT

Questions about the appropriate approach to bilingual or multilingual education are discussed. It is noted that bilingualism was formerly reserved for the elite but that bilingual education should be available to all since it promotes a better understanding of world differences. A few examples (Hong Kong, Singapore, Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland) are cited to illustrate various approaches to bilingual education, including issues of language of instruction and the language proficiency of citizens. In Brunei Darussalam, as in India and Tunisia, languages are offered according to subjects taught. Implications of such language policy are considered. It is suggested that policymakers must remember that two languages are involved (not just the second language) and that strict bilingualism, in which students do not have a first language, may produce students without a soul or a country. It is concluded that education should start with the first language, preferably the home language, and introduce second or third languages after a few years of formal education in the first. Contains 6 references. (LB)

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Dr. Laurent Metzger

Bilingualism or Monolingualism plus One or More Foreign Languages

We all agree that strict monolingual education is not satisfactory at present. So the alternative is to try bilingualism or multilingualism, yet, we should ask ourselves what type of bilingualism we should strive for. And before that, we should try to find out what do we want, what do we expect and what do we hope to attain from a bilingual education. First, how do we identify a bilingual individual? Is he or she able to use two different languages? Or is such individual in complete command of two languages? Must such individual be in command of both written and oral skills to be considered bilingual? Actually there are many types of bilingualism. For instance, Marta Rado in her research found out that there are three main categories of bilingual individuals: first, those who have a perfect and complete command of two languages, then those who have a good command of two languages (and who form the bulk of bilingual individuals) and finally, the passive bilingual people who are able to understand two different languages but unable to address in those two languages.1 The second category is also called the social bilingual individuals. On the other hand, the first category is hard to find. So real bilingual individuals are not that frequent. Actually a very small number of individuals can call themselves real bilinguals.

Nationalism which appeared with the independence of many countries in Africa and Asia opened a new page in the history of language development in the world. National languages come about as language policies were formulated and implemented. Education policies followed suit and the medium of instruction changed in the former colonies and protectorates. Some countries opted for education in that national language while others preferred a bilingual system. Different approaches have been selected : Now it may be the time to have a look at those approaches in order to find out which ones have been successful and which ones need to be overhauled. Another consideration must be given to the pair of languages selected. Which languages are we going to choose? In an article published in Canada, it was stated that it would be wrong to teach in a language while the main working language in that particular country is another.2 In other words, the medium of instruction

1. "Student versus Teacher - Centered Bilingual Education : A Neglected Question" in Bilingual Education, RELC, Singapore, 1980.

2. Gilles Gagne "Francophones Make Great Progress" in Language and Society, Number 33, Winter 1990, Ottawa.

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selected requires due consideration and a bilingual programme has to be carefully chosen and considered useful in that country.

In this paper we are going to consider briefly a few examples around the globe, list a few problems encountered in these cases and finally make a few proposals regarding the type and the degree of bilingual education we should aim at in order to produce competent students who are able to express themselves in two (or more languages) and useful to their own country.

There was a time in history when bilingualism was reserved for an elite. The ruling class as well as many intellectuals were provided with a bilingual and often trilingual education. Languages were fashionable in those days in some palaces. In our present world, bilingual education should be meant for all. We believe it would help to attain a higher degree of tolerance on the part of the students of such education policy, it would help to promote a better understanding of the world differences and it will, undoubtedly show the richness and of course, what may be lacking in the numerous languages alive at present and around the globe.

Before we can assess real bilingual education, let us glance at a few examples of bilingual education in different parts of the world to see how educationalists have tackled such drastic policies. For instance in Hong Kong, a degree of bilingual education is offered in high schools with Cantonese and English being the two languages taught and used as medium of instruction. It must be noted that the two languages are not given the same weightage. So the real medium of instruction in that territory (at least at present, for it is hard to say what will be the new education policy after 1997) is Cantonese, the mother tongue of most students.1 We are going to see later on in this paper, that, as we have been much involved in drafting new curricula to satisfy the requirements of these new bilingual policies, we have somewhat paid less consideration towards the mother tongue or as it is often referred to, the first language. Quite often we have more or less taken for granted this first language without thinking that it should require more attention from our part as it plays a major role in the child's development.

Our second example is Singapore which also prides itself in providing a sound bilingual education. Recently it has found out in the Republic that students coming out of the education system were not proficient in Chinese. A greater consideration is now given to the language. Yet, quite frankly, the former Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew said in a speech to the Port Workers' Union that

1. The Straits Times, 29 September 1991

"Very few societies speak two languages".1 This statement is very pertinent in a sense that it is really hard to find communities able to express themselves in more than one language and it shows quite clearly that it is much easier to find a bilingual individual than a bilingual group in society.

Other countries are often said to be bilingual. Is it the result of a bilingual education policy? Let's review them one by one in order to assess their degree of bilingualism. In the case of Switzerland, we often believe that the country is at least bilingual, if not trilingual, as the Confederation has three official languages, namely, German, French and Italian. Yet the country cannot be really considered trilingual as only a minority of Swiss are really bilingual or trilingual. So, most of the time, each community uses only one language. The same can be said of Belgium. Although the kingdom has two official languages, only a few citizens can be called real bilingual. What about Canada then, which is often mentioned in the papers and which is said to have formulated long ago, a bilingual language policy? However that language policy was not meant to produce real bilingual individuals but rather to have a general bilingual administration in the whole country and at all levels. Yet one very successful education programme launched by Canada in this later part of the 20th century has been the Immersion Language Programme. In such programme, for instance, English speaking students were taught in French in order for them to acquire rapidly and effectively a sound command of that second language. As we are going to see later in more detail, long before exposed to another language, the Canadian students had mastered their first language. The two languages were not taught at the same time, or at least at the same level. We will see later on that this is very important in formulating a bilingual education policy.

On the other hand. many countries have chosen a different approach to bilingual education policy. For instance, Brunei Darussalam like India and Tunisia has decided to offer languages according to subjects taught. In such a case, a few subjects are taught in one language and others in the other language of the bilingual policy. In the case of India, History and Geography are taught in Hindi in New Delhi while scientific subjects are taught in English.2 Such approach may lead to some confusion. Are the students going to believe that a particular language is good for such topics while other subjects need to be taught in the other language?

1. The Straits Times, 14 October 1991.

2. R.N. Ghosh "Indian Bilingualism and The Teaching of English" in Bilingual Education, op.cit.

They may even think that one language cannot be used for certain subjects or topics. They may have a lower image of their own first language in such a case. Is that what we want? Or is it true that certain languages cannot be used as medium of instruction for certain subjects, let's say, scientific topics? Malaysia against all odds has proven to the world that scientific topics and concepts can be taught in Malay. Of course it has been found out that the proficiency in English among Malaysian students has somewhat declined. This was to be expected if we agree with Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's statement which I mentioned earlier.

At the micro level, we can observe how bilingual education is implemented. At the famous school, Le Lycee International de Saint Germain en Laye, we can notice that the high school does not provide full bilingual programmes but rather an education in a first language as well as an intensive teaching in one or more languages. Once again, the emphasis is given to the first language (or the mother tongue).1

After this brief review of a few cases of bilingual education, we should be able to see more clearly what has been considered as bilingual education policy and what do we mean by bilingual education policy. Is it real bilingual education policy in which all subjects are taught indifferently in the two languages? From the above mentioned examples, it does not seem to be the case. Or do we expect the students to have an excellent command of their first language (L1) and to be more or less fluent in the second language? There seems to be a trend which gives more consideration to the first language (or the mother tongue). For instance, Mr. Ibrahim Ahmed Omer, Sudan's Senior Minister for Education said " What we want is for our students to be taught in the language of their own culture and belief".2 This statement is a reminder that we should be very careful when dealing with language matters; we can formulate brand new language policies, innovative bilingual education programmes but in the long run we are dealing with people, with students who may be the leaders of tomorrow and have, therefore, to be equipped with the best language skills useful in their own country.

After reviewing these examples, we are able to make a few general comments on bilingual education. Such education works, but a few requirements have to be made. First, when we implement our bilingual programmes, we must always be aware

1. Hugo Baetens Beardsmore "Bilingual Education in International Schools, European Schools and Experimental Schools : A Comparative Analysis" in Bilingual Education, op. cit.

2. The Straits Times, 22 January 1992

that we are dealing with two languages and not only one. It may seem superfluous to say so. But we have often noticed that educationalists seem to spend much more time on the second language than on the first (or the mother tongue) as if the latter had been mastered and need no further effort either from the teacher or from the student. Is it the case? Not really, as we all know that a language we have learnt can always be further improved and also that a language we have learnt (even our mother tongue or first language in extreme cases) can be forgotten if we do not practice it regularly. "Faut-it rappeler qu'une langue apprise n'est pas acquise, mais aussi qu'une langue premiere, acquise des l'enfance, peut etre oubliee par la suite si elle n'est pas suffisamment utilisee". (Do we have to remember that a language learnt is never fully acquired, but also that a first language acquired from childhood can be forgotten later on if it is not fully utilised).1 This statement shows us how fragile our language teaching and our language learning. Wolgang Franke, a world renowned German sinologist and educationalist seems also very concerned by the importance we should attach to the first language. In a recent interview he said "You should begin with your mother tongue, have a good grasp of it before you learn a foreign language. You cannot do well the other way round. This is because you must first know your own language and culture even before you go to school. You have to lay a good foundation in your own culture before you can begin to absorb a foreign one".2 In other words, we must not neglect our first language, it remains our first priority. The Dutch have had a somewhat painful experience and are not very sure they have done the right thing. As foreign language teaching has been very liberal in the Netherlands, most Dutch can master one or more foreign languages, but this lead to some unwanted consequences and the Dutch Education Minister recognised that "Command of foreign languages must be preceded by mastering your own language".3 His point of view is shared by educationalists in the country; for instance Herman Pleig, a professor of literature at the University of Amsterdam said "We find knowledge of foreign languages important.....But the price is that you give fewer lessons in your own language".4 So due consideration must be given to the first language as many educationalists seem to agree.

Moreover if we try to apply a strict bilingualism in our education programme we may produce students without a soul or without a country, they may have two L1

1. Etat de la Francophonie, Rapport 1989, La Documentation Francaise, Paris 1990.
2. The Straits Times, 24 June 1991.
3. The Straits Times, 26 November 1991.
4. The Straits Times, 26 November 1991.

but where do they stand? Thus strict bilingualism is to be avoided . It should be reserved for a few. Real bilingualism would mean having two countries and holding two passports. Should such situation be encouraged? Is it advisable?

If we depart from real bilingalism in order to attain a more practical education policy, what can we suggest? A logical answer would be to select the first language as the major medium of instruction. Again the first language is rehabilitated and given due respect before any other second, third languages.

Another interesting feature of bilingualism and bilingual education policies is that discussions on such topic have been going on for quite some time . As early as in 1929, a conference was held in Luxembourg. So it means that over sixty years, educationalists have been writing, drafting curricula, meeting in order to implemement bilingual education. Yet very few examples world-wide can be considered as really successful. We seem to be still searching for a better way to promote such policy and obtain the results we would like to have.

Another feature we can mention in this part of the world is the absence of L1 in some speakers. They do have a L2 and possibly a L3, but no first language.Is this desirable? As a matter of fact, everyone needs a first language (or mother tongue), we need a first language to feel confident in. Without such first language we are at loss and we keep on code-switching. Some may believe that this proves the high degree of bilingualism attained, but actually it denotes a lack in the mastery of a language. In Singapore, we can often hear Chinese speaking individuals suddenly introducing English words in the course of their conversation. This does not indicate that bilingualism has succeeded, but rather that they feel more confident to pass the message across in English or that they have forgotten the proper word or term in Chinese. Such a trend is to be avoided if we intend to maintain the purity and maybe the autonomy of our languages. If this trend perpetuates, it may lead to the formation of a new pidgin. Is it what we are looking for? This code-switching is not exclusively practised by the Chinese in Singapore. It is also noticed among Malay speakers who, in order to avoid the difficult choice of the right term in the numerous forms of address, resort to use English pronouns such as "I" and "You". Very often in this part of the world, when we ask someone what is his or her first language, the answer is not forthcoming. Why is it so? Simply because they are at loss and cannot reply easily. Can it be the Chinese dialect they speak (and do not write at home)? Is it Malay the medium of instruction from primary school to tertiary education in Malaysia? Is it English which is (still) an important working language in that country? This baffles the European observer because the question of first language

seldoms occurs in his home country. For a Roman it is Italian, for a Parisian it is French and it is English for a Londoner etc...

I tend to believe that the absence of a first language is a kind of handicap. It is as if we do not have a base, a home and we keep on keep on travelling precisely because we do not have such place to call home. We do subscribe to the idea of learning several languages but as we have seen in the examples and the various points of view mentioned earlier, the first language has to be given due consideration and everyone should have such first language. It should be a kind of human right.

Finally, after mentioning a few examples and giving consideration to some interesting statements by language practitioners and politicians, we would like to formulate a few proposals on bilingual education to sum up what could be done to improve the situation and to reach a higher proficiency in languages.

First, when we draft our bilingual education programme, we should have a timeframe. In other words, the chronological language programme should be clearly set. To me it would be wiser to offer a staggered language programme in order to teach the various languages at different times and, therefore, at different levels. Instead of providing a simultaneous bilingual (or why not multilingual) education we would offer a consecutive approach. Thus, we should first start with the mother tongue (or the first language) and only later on, the second language could be introduced. Naturally you are going to ask me what do you mean by "later on"?. The best answer I can give you now is that there should be a few years of teaching the mother tongue alone and only then a second and after that a third language could be offered. Therefore only when the first language has been partially mastered, we can start thinking of introducing other languages in school curricula. Of course we have some constraints in a sense that the best time to teach a child languages is when he or she is below twelve. To sum up, we should start with the first language and preferably that first language has been the home language (although it is not always the case unfortunately, as we have seen earlier), then, after a few years of formal education in that first language, a second language can be introduced and later on a third, if the need arises. Of course some questions still need to be answered. First, what role do we give to the second or the third language? It has been argued that it is best that the second language also becomes a language of subjects taught at school among the two languages? As we have seen earlier, this may lead to confusion about the status and the capabilities of the respective languages. It would be better to maintain the first language in its role of medium of instruction

throughout the entire school curriculum in order to give due respect to that first language. In such a case, the second language and the third (if any) would remain as subject taught. Such a approach would make students proud of their first language and such a feeling seems to me very natural. Moreover, this approach would avoid one pitfall of the other method (which would give the same weightage to the two languages and then the two languages would be used as medium of instruction) as students would continue to learn their first language. We have noticed too frequently, in bilingual education programmes, that it appeared that the first language is more or less taken for granted and not given enough attention. Yet we all know that we can always improve our command and our knowledge of a language. So in this approach we put forward, students continue learning their first language while discovering a new one. It may be easier to do so when we are at different stages in language learning, for we have a better command of our first language when we are just starting to learn the structures of the second one. With such a method we tend to avoid interferences which usually occur when we are learning two different languages at the same time. Only when students have acquired a strong command in their first language, a second language is offered as subject to them. In such a system the students do have a strong L1 and add to it a L2 and maybe later a L3. You may wonder what kind of bilingualism is attained through that system. True, it is not perfect bilingualism. Yet, to me, it is a better one as it meets our objectives of bilingual education. We formulate such education policies in order for students to be able to communicate and work in two or more languages. The important concept here is to work in a language or the idea of "working languages"; we do not expect every student, coming out of a (revised) bilingual (or multilingual) education, to be an international conference interpreter, but we would like them to be able to express themselves equally well, both at the written level and oral level.

Feeling quite confident in their first language (L1), discovering one or more foreign (or not so foreign) languages, the students may play a better part in the development of the country. Being introduced to other languages is not only a help for communication but it may also help students to have a better idea of their own first language. We learn a lot about our own language as we stryggle to learn other languages. This is another benefit of bilingual, or multilingual education.

In conclusion, we would like to point out that bilingualism or multilingualism will undoubtedly be debated and discussed in further conferences, seminars and journals for a long time. Yet we noticed some improvement. In the last century, bilingualism or multilingualism was only reserved for an elite while nowadays this

kind of language education, accepted world-wide is much more democratic. Nevertheless, the results of bilingual and multilingual education policies and programmes are at present, not as positive as we would like them to be. So probably some new thinking has to be done about it and maybe, if some suggestions put forward earlier on are accepted, we should be able to observe some improvement. Of course, we are aware of the fact that it takes quite a while between the time a reform is introduced in our school curricula and the first results due to such changes. Yet in education, like in any human endeavour, changes do occur and, and at times for the better.